# The Challenges of Translation in Third World Literatures: The Case of English-speaking Africa

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Most African writers started to write in the languages of the colonizers without considering all the implications involved in the use of such languages. Indeed, as Roland Barthes points out, "le langage n'est jamais innocent "1 (language is never innocent) because it embodies people's social, political and cultural institutions. The language issue in the African context is still considered as one of the most heated controversies and most literature ever written is limited to the ideological aspect of the language question. The classical question consisted in asking if writing in the language of the colonizer was problematic for African writers or if they felt comfortable in using this language. But what has been neglected so far is essentially how the African language is "reappropriated" and given expression in the imagination of the African writer. In other words, how are the epic, the initiation story, and the fable, common in many oral traditions, "reappropriated" in the novel written in a European language.

In a situation of diglossia and bilingualism, such as that which characterizes African countries, the use of a foreign language as a medium of literary expression raises a certain number of questions. Is any given individual capable of mastering completely his or her mother tongue as well as a foreign language ? although this question can be answered in the affirmative, it is still possible to share the doubt entertained by Todorov when he writes : « Je me demande si le bilinguisme fondé sur la neutralité et la parfaite réversibilité des deux langues n'est pas un leurre ou tout au moins une exception. »2 Todorov's remarks are pertinent because in any bilingual situation there is always an unconscious interference of the mother tongue in any individual's actualization of a second language. In the case of African literature, many writings manifestly show the conscious and sometimes unconscious interference of the mother tongue.

Another important question to ask is whether a European language is capable of perfectly expressing an African culture. In other words, can a European language translate in an entirely satisfactory manner an imagination which is deeply rooted in an African culture ? These questions are very pertinent to African literature and the language situation in two ways : on the one hand, the ability of the writer to perfectly master the Western language in which he or she writes and, on the other hand, the ability of the Western language to translate the specific structures of the African imagination. For Fanon, being colonized by a language has larger implications for one's consciousness: "To speak . . . means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization"3. Speaking French means that one accepts, or is coerced into accepting, the collective consciousness of the French, which identifies blackness with evil and sin. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon dealt extensively with the problem of language and cultural alienation. According to him, cultural values are internalized, or "epidermalized" into consciousness, creating a fundamental disjuncture between the black man's consciousness and his body. Under these conditions, the black man is necessarily alienated from himself. 4

If education and literature can forge a sense of identity in a society torn between dominator and dominated, what then can we say about the position of English in African academics and the usage of the English language in African literature? In 1975 Chinua Achebe gave a speech entitled "The African Writer and the English Language". He answered the above challenge with these words:

> "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it." 5

African writer Gabriel Okara also addresses the issue of writing African literature in English. He wrote:

> "Some may regard this way of writing in English as a desecration of the language. This is of course not true. Living languages grow like

> living things, and English is far from a dead language.... Why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way?"6

Again, Achebe agrees,

> "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings." 7

A novel like Achebe's Things Fall Apart perfectly reveals this unconscious shift. He is the one who testifies best to the difficulty but also the will to use a language that attempts to express in a satisfactory manner the imagination of his Ibo tribe. Realising that the English language was inadequate to convey his Ibo imagination, Achebe was obliged to use purely African expressions that come from his native language. There is not a single page in Things Fall Apart where one does not come across an Ibo word or expression or a turn of phrase from the mother tongue judiciously transposed into English. This novel is certainly the best example of all the African novels that have contributed to the enrichment of the English language. Indeed, in a concrete way, Achebe has tried to resolve the difficulty of rendering exactly his African ideas, thoughts and feelings in English by using, for example, some Ibo words. He felt compelled to use the exact word in his mother tongue because he realized that the English synonyms were not enough to convey his African concept.Thus, the wish to reduce the distance between his native language and English leads Achebe to simply translate the African words in an effort to convey his Ibo concepts as much as possible. Achebe's writing is therefore an attempt to use the African word in English . For this reason he also attempts to translate forms, speech and thought patterns which come from a long African tradition.

Gabriel Okara has tied theoretical reflection to the linguistic problem that confronts the African novelist in the practice of writing.He uses a conventional English that imposes Ijaw syntax and modes of thought on the English language. As Okara himself once remarked in his essay « African

Speech ...English Words » :

> As a writer who believes in the utilisation of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer in whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression. I have endeavoured in my works to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions. For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people.In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expessing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had ti learn. I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise.8

Okara relies on the conscious transfer of the patterns of interaction in the native culture to the English language as in many of Achebe's novels. This takes the form of translation of proverbs and idioms into English , use of speech initiators, local address forms, and the "nativisation" of cohesion and cohesiveness through lexical shifts, just to mention a few. Okara's experiment is a deliberate attempt at "indigenising" the English language to capture the social norms, attitudes and values of his people as illustrated in the following passage from Okars's experimental novel The Voice :

> It was the day's ending, ansd Okolo by a window stood. Okolo stood looking
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> At the sun behind the tree tops falling. The finishing sun reflecting like a dying away memory. It was like an idol's face, no one knowing what is behind. Okolo at the palm tree looked. Okolo the window left and went to his table. A book opened and read. The book he read, the book he read. A long time he took to read the book, till nigh fell and closed the eye of the sky.9

The above passage is a direct literal translation of the Ijaw language (the language of the author) into English. One need not understand Ijaw, Okara's native language,to understand that in this novel the mother tongue influences and disrupts the English language. The essential difference between the Ijaw and English syntactic structures is in the contrasting positions of their verbs and objects. Instead of the SVO English structure , the writer uses an SOV structure which, I suppose is an Ijaw language structure. A standard English equivalent of the passage would probably be like this :

> It was the end of the day, and Okolo stood by a window. He stood, looking at the sun set behind the tree tops. The setting sun reflects like a fading memory . It was like the face of an idol, no one knowing what is behind it. Okolo looked at the palm tree, left the window, and went to his table. He opened a book and read it till the night fell.

Therefore, Okara's syntax, in Chantal Zabus's terms « creates a counter-value system which jeopardizes the English logocentric relation between word and referent, between signifier and signified. » 10 In other words, in deconstructing the syntax of English through the translation of Ijaw, Okara seeks to free the African text from its foreign domination. For, as Zairian critic Georges N'gal asserts, it is the African languages that give form and meaning to modern African writing in European languages: "S'il faut chercher une spécificité, disons une particularité de l'écrivain africain, c'est que son écriture est travaillée, fécondée par sa langue maternelle d'abord et par les langues africaines. Les romans. . . ne peuvent être compris avec profit que si l'on connaît le contexte linguistique de ces romans. Certains passages, les noms des personnages. . . sont une traduction. . .»11

In fact, in modern African literature, the language issue and its relation to the notion of translation is problematic. My presentation tries to examine, though briefly, how translation functions as a critical as well as a creative activity in African literature. Literally, to "translate" means "to carry across." It also means transformation and transmutation, for all these activities take place when the African writer sets out to write in a European language. My approach to the notion of translation will be understood first as

a linguistic operation that consists in transposing meaning from one language to another. However, as Anuradha Dingwaney points out, if translation is one of the primary means by which texts written in one or another indigenous language of the various countries arbitrarily grouped together together under the "Third" World are
made available in Western languages, it is not restricted to such linguistic transfers alone. For Dingwaney, "translation is also the vehicle" through which 'Third World cultures (are made to) travel--transported or 'borne across' to and recuperated by audiences in the West. As she rightly points out ,"even texts written in English or in one of the metropolitan languages, but originating in or about non-Western cultures, can be considered under the rubric of translation"12. Borrowing from Dingwaney, translation is also defined to encompass the process through which African writers incorporate oral and traditional literary techniques such as proverbs, repetition, folktales, etc., into the foreign medium. In his preface to Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth, Sartre explains that the ex-native, French-speaking "bends that (French) language to new requirements." He refers to the modifications that African writers, for instance, bring to the European language, modifications that do not come from within the confines of the European language but rather from without, that is, from their African languages and models.13

While literary translation in Africa might be a novelty, there is no reason why it should not be governed by similar constraints which have influenced this kind of translation elsewhere. Even though literary translation in Africa has not been subjected to the same kind of analysis as has been the case in the West, scholars are becoming more and more aware of the role of translation in African literature. It must be obvious, however, that questions of formal and dynamic equivalence introduced by Nida are major problems to the translator who works with African texts because of the multiplicity of meanings usually attached to specific words in African languages. For this reason, most of the Western-oriented, linguistics-based translation theories have shortcomings and therefore are not very applicable or relevant to African texts. The major weakness of these theories is that they do not take into consideration underlying socio-cultural factors in works produced by African artists. A consideration of the se factors in African literature will

produce what Kwame Appiah has called "thick translation" and which he defines as "a translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context. . . A thick description of the context of literary production, a translation that draws on and creates that sort of understanding , meet the need to challenge ourselves. . . to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others."14. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer, has translated some of his works himself and makes a strong plea for translation to bridge the gap between local and international languages. In Decolonising the Mind , he calls translation a "dialogue between the literatures, languages and cultures of the different nationalities within any one country- forming the foundations of a truly national literature and culture, a truly national sensibility!"15 Ngugi preserves his particular culture but preserving his language, but he insists on a universal communication through translation. For Ngugi, translation can resolve the conflict between particular language and universal communication.16

If the translation of African literature from African languages into European languages is not an easy task, the translation of this literature from one European language into another presents even more problems. This is because African writers are creative translators in the sense that in their works, they convey concepts and values from a given linguistic, oral culture or what Ngugi calls orature, into a written form of a foreign language. In other words, the African writer is an 'interpreter' of culture in the sense that he is sometimes communicating ideas and meanings of cultural artifacts in a given society.

The "Africanization" or what Zabus calls 'indigenization' process, makes literary translation in Africa particularly difficult because no theory of literary translation for this area has been articulated so far. In addition to the specificity of the African text to be translated, translating the narrative prose of African writers of English expression into another European language like French, presents additional problems. This is because of the psychological differences between these languages as developed by Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, in Stylistique Comparée du Français et de l'Anglais.17

African writing is a hybrid product because it captures an African reality in a non-African form. By using both a foreign language and a foreign

literary framework, the African writer is compelled to conform to the spirit of these elements. In this case, the translator of say, English-speaking African literature, has to go beyond the English expression to the other culture, the other psychology that lies beneath it, that is, to reach the African context which is its focus. Although the work to be translated is written in a foreign language, the translator has to capture the African aesthetic which informs the work of the author and which is its driving force. In this regard, I have been particularly interested in some of the translated novels. Louis Tremaine's translation of Mohammed Dib's Qui se Souvient de la Mer (1962) (Who Remembers the Sea /1985) is a good example of the translator's attempt at unravelling the linguistic and cultural ambiguities inherent in the original text.

In this context, Paul Bandia has observed that translating African literary works is a double "transposition" process: a primary level of translation, i.e, the expression of African thought in a European language by an African writer and a secondary level of translation, i.e, the "transfer" of African thought from one European language to another by the translator. The primary level of translation results in an African variety of the European language, and the translator's task is to deal with the unique problems posed by this so-called non-standard language. At the secondary level, the translator deals not only with the interlingual but also the intersemiotic translation process, as both the content and formal characteristics of the African oral narrative are important to the full representation of
meaning in the written target language.18 In other words, since the African author captures both the content and form in the European language, the translator also needs to carry across into the target European language the same African content and form. The critical translator has to be alive to the socio-cultural systems involved in the African text so that his or her translation will be able to carry the African aesthetic into the other European medium of expression. Finding "equivalent expression and register" implies that the translator has to show a keen sensitivity to the psychological differences between the two European languages since these languages do not share the same world view. The linguistic and cultural differences between the languages will add to the difficulty of transferring African thought from one European language into another.

Because of these factors. there is a subjective dimension to the process since the translation will have to depend on the translator's reading of the cultural and ideological concepts and social history that produced the African text. However, despite the obvious difficulties, the main aim of the translator of African literature is to preserve , as much as possible, the cultural value systems of African thought.

As a conclusion, one might say that the creative use of European languages in African literature shows clearly how great is the debt owed to translation. It demonstrates that translation is significant in African literature in two senses: it not only explores the practice through which texts are transferred from one culture to another but also explores the process whereby writers transpose and transform their languages and models into the dominant culture. It is true that translation is playing an important role in the criticism and interpretation of African literature since more and more works are being translated into other languages. Still, translating does not only mean possessing the linguistic competence, some extralinguistic abilities are required for analysing and interpreting the context of the African literary text. A good translation will reflect, to the best degree
possible, the connotations, rhetorical impact, and emotive style of the original text. Accuracy requires preserving all of these aspects of the original meaning. Unfortunately, given the fact that most translators of African writings abide by the Western translation theories, their translated texts often distort the original because they often give primacy to the European languages the African writers had sought to subvert in their act of writing.

## ENDNOTES:

1. Roland Barthes, Le Degré Zero de l'Ecriture (Paris:Seuil, 1953),67.
2. T. Todorov, "Bilinguisme, Dialogisme et Schizophrénie,"Du Bilinguisme (Paris:Denoel, 1985),26.
3. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Constance Farington(New York:Grove,1968), 17-8.
4. Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks
5. Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (New York:Doubleday/Anchor,1975),102-103.

6. Gabriel Okara. "African Speech. . . English Words." Transition. n°10. Sept.1963,15-6.
7. Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (New York:Doubleday/Anchor,1975),102-103.
8. Gabriel Okara, "African Speech. . . English Words." Transition n°10. Sept.1963,15-6.
9. Gabriel Okara, The Voice (London : Heinemann, 1964),2.
10. Chantal Zabus, The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel (Amsterdam: Rodopi,1991),125.
11. N'gal, interview with P.Herzbeger-Fofana, Ecrivains Africains et Identités Culturelles:Entretiens(Tubingen:Stauffenburg,1989), 116-7.
12. Anuradha Dingwaney,Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross Cultural Texts (Pittsburgh:Pittsburgh Un., 1995),4.
13. Jean Paul Sartre, Preface to Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth,Trans.Constance Farrington (N. York: Grove, 1968).
14. Kwame Appiah "Thick Translation", Callalo 16.4 (1993),817-18.
15. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Decolonising the Mind (London:Heinemenn, 1986),85.
16. For further information about the differences between languages, especially between English and French, refer to Jean Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, Stylistique Comparée du Français et de l'Anglais (Paris: Didier,1958).
17. Paul Bandia, "Translation as Cultural Transfer: Evidence from African Creative Writing," Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction 6.2 (1993), 55-7